What Does a Crow Know?

By CARL SCHURZ LOWDEN

This crow is registering curiosity and a bit of suspicion, too. He knows the folly of being gullible.

MEET Jeff, of Walbridge Park, Toledo. You will find him in "Bird Row" with four or five crow pals in the same cage, owls to the left of him, and parrots to the right of him. A ventriloquial voice greets you in genuine American style with "Hello," or gives the reverse English of "Goodby" if you do not measure up to the speaker's ideals.

"Now," you wonder, "which parrot is doing his afternoon exercise?" You observe them closely, but the birds remain peculiarly quiet. Your gaze then shifts to the crow cage. There you catch Jeff in the act, his throat puffed as he makes ready for a second "Hello" or "Goodby."

Jeff, of Toledo, however, is not the one and only talking crow. There are others, notably Jocko and Mike, whose home address is New York, New York, but the "boys" are really at home wherever their shiny wire apartment rests.

Jocko and Mike are in vaudeville. These crow aristocrats play in theaters of the highest class, and they would summarily turn up their respective beaks at any house of a shabby sort. Jocko juggles rubber balls and catches them when thrown from the audience. Mike is his understudy. When anything serious happens to Jocko, Mike goes on in his stead.

Notice the top of Jocko's head. You can almost count the few feathers remaining there. Mike has plucked them out. He is an ambitious fellow; if he were the manager of the act, he would "star" himself and Jocko would be relegated to the position of understudy.

The trainer avers that Mike is not the finished artist such as his "dear Jocko." Mike knows the situation in its entirety just as I have presented it; he has figured out that his own rise to fame will be slow and uncertain unless he can eliminate his rival.

City crows are smart. No one can deny that. But they are no smarter than their country cousins, some of whom can count as far as three. Others may be able to exceed this limit, but not those which concentrated their marauding activities upon a certain Indiana cornfield.

The owner of the field objected. The crows were hungry, of course, and did not care. The man shouldered his gun and declared war.

Had the birds attended a crow school and received diplomas to attest their proficiency? It seemed that they had; for they spotted the gun at a great distance and cawed a warning. The man tried to creep up catlike, but the crows were too wise. Just before he got in range, they serenely flapped their wings, converted themselves into flying machines, and departed for some other fellow's cornfield.

From day to day the man repeated his attacks, but the black fellows were never caught napping. They teased and tantalized, probably cawed out, "Gee, you are easy," watched and waited while he approached, then leisurely made a dignified retreat.

Presently the man hit upon a scheme, or system, whereby he might outwit the nimble-minded thieves. He and a son trundled a piano box out into the field. The man got inside in an effort to ambush the wary birds. However, they must have known he was there, as they would not come near until he climbed out and started homeward. After that they never failed to caw a warning to all their friends when the man arrived; and when he fell back they cawed, "All safe."

The owner changed his tactics. He and his son, both carrying guns, went to the box in the field. The crows had grouped themselves along the edge of the patch and in a couple of trees. The son walked away a few minutes later. When they saw him leave, they talked among themselves, meanwhile continuing to watch and wait.

"You can't fool us," they may have said. "We saw two go in and one come out. The other must be getting awfully warm in that pine box. We're comfortable. We're cool as cucumbers. We like to play this game."

The next time the man and two sons went to the improvised fort in the field. One son moved away, but the black pirates maintained a safe distance between themselves and the pine box. When the other son departed the birds became voluble, chronicled the event, but did not venture nearer. After the father had gone, of course, the crows displayed no fear. Why should they be afraid of an empty box that formerly contained a piano and had just been evacuated by three of the enemy?

But man has a superior mentality. A crow can think and count just so far but no further. On the next occasion the owner of the field brought three men with him. Three departed one at a time at intervals of eight or ten minutes. Then the crows merrily approached the box, but they went away sadder and possibly wiser, as they left two of their number dead on the field. Having come within range they discovered too late that the owner of the field was still inside the box. They could count three, but four was beyond them.

No dweller in the broad outdoors of which it has been aptly said, "God made the country, man made the town," has failed to observe how intelligently the crow armies fly southward each autumn. Theirs is no haphazard, uncontrolled journey. The migration is well organized. Scouts come first to ascertain the safest route. Patrols are formed and posted on either side of the line of travel. There are no lost soldiers, few fatalities, and only infrequent mishaps. Somewhere there must be a general in charge of all the precautions taken, some mind that directs the entire army.

When the army stops to feed in some handy cornfield, where the grain is fast reaching the state of maturity, guards ascend to the tops of trees and keep a sharp lookout for any and all danger that threatens. Try to approach with a gun. Some sentinel will surely spot you long before you draw near the feasting place. Pick up a stone and hurl it in the direction of the crows' café. What does the sentinel do? He notes every move you make, and caws out:

"He's picking a stone from the path. Now he's looking toward the field. Now he's hurling the stone."

The hungry army catches the message. It rises with one accord, a huge black cloud that shuts out the sun. There is a monstrous swishing, flapping of ebony wings. And when the stone comes back to earth, no crows are there.

During half a minute, perhaps, the sentinel remains on his treetop perch. He is the rear guard. Presently, having done his work well, he wheels away to join the canny clan. He will breakfast at the next stop when he has been relieved by another soldier as vigilant as himself.

Crows make interesting pets, as they are ever doing the unexpected. They have an abnormal amount of curiosity and some of the original Adam. They pilfer all sorts of small articles, pencils, toothbrushes, veils, handkerchiefs, clothespins, small flags, bright-hued paper, lace, bits of cord—almost anything not too heavy for transportation by air. They usually have a cache or hiding place where the plunder is stored. In fact, a pet crow seems to be a natural thief.

Today many authorities, ornithologists and other specialists, agree that the crow is the wisest of birds. The authorities praise the crow for his "wit and wisdom," development of social habits, his "subrationality," and the possession of a brain larger in proportion to the weight of the body than that of any other bird. This last point is widely considered the supreme physical test for determining intelligence.

How much does a crow know? Sometimes—I might as well say often—he outwits man. But what man is going to confess and tell how the black bird outdid him? On the other hand man boasts when he bests the "scalawag."

At a beach a crow will seize a clam or a mussel. He knows it contains a delectable tidbit, but he cannot open it with his talons or his beak. He does not worry. He has a head that tells him how to proceed. Away he flies with the clam, drops it when he is directly over a rock, and then descends to pick the meat out of the bursted shell.

Crows roosting on a bare tree in autumn gives it springtime appearance.

The ebony forager rarely quarrels. He looks upon himself as the rightful owner of the woods and fields; human beings are regarded as intruders. Like a gentleman he lives and works usually in the open. Occasionally he offends against man-made standards of conduct, rarely against his own. In fact, he is neither as bad as the worst of us nor as good as the best of us.

The late John Burroughs, famous lover of birds and bees and wild creatures everywhere, judged that Nature has the crow very much at heart else he would not be scattered over the earth. The grand old man called the dusky denizen of the air and fields a cheerful countryman, freely credited him with a vein of humor, and pictured him as anything but a bird of leisure.

This sentinel is guarding the army of the crows migrating southward for the winter season.

"He is always busy," Burroughs wrote, "going somewhere, or policing the woods, or saluting his friends, or calling together the clans, or mobbing the hawk, or spying out new feeding grounds, or taking stock of the old, or just cawing to keep in touch with his fellows. He is very sociable. He has many engagements; now to the woods, now to the fields, now to this valley, now to the next—a round of pleasure or duty all the day long.

"The stiller the day, the more noise he makes. He is never the sneaker, never has the air of a prowler. He is always in the public eye or ear. His color gives him away; his voice gives him away; on the earth or in the sky he is heard and seen afar.

"He always looks prosperous; he always looks contented; his voice is always reassuring. The farmer may be disgruntled and discouraged, but his crows are not. The country is good enough for them; they can meet their engagements; their acres are not mortgaged."

Burroughs characterized the crow as "full of the original Adam," but he did it with sympathy and understanding and a completeness of knowledge. He knew that the much-maligned bird is neither as black as his plumage nor as dark as his detractors would have us believe. He believes if the bird's faults were weighed against his virtues, the latter would be heavier.

Just consider the crow's vice of poultry raiding. Government experts have definitely determined that the great citizenry of crows are not guilty; yet the number of individuals sinning in this respect has been sufficient to brand the entire family. Furthermore, he is the enemy of and aggressor against the bird which has so specialized in its particular type of pillaging that it has received the infamous name of "chicken hawk."

He plucks some corn but not nearly so much as is charged against him. A telescope or spyglass reveals him often as a friend to the farmer, inasmuch as he is frequently seen thus searching for the cutworm that is after the corn; apparently he ranks the cutworm as preferable to the grain. If the cutworms he consumes were not molested, they would easily triple the damage he does. So it is possible that an owner commits a crime against himself when he shoots a crow which he has discovered pecking around the sprouting corn plants.

"The Crow and its Relation to Man" is an interesting bulletin (No. 621) issued by the Department of Agriculture at the small cost of 15 cents. It handles his case impartially. It commends him for preying on rabbits, mice and other rodents that are neither respecters of field crops nor of orchards. He is praised because he destroys beetles, worms, grasshoppers, caterpillars and bugs; in fact, considerably more than two pages of fine type are used in enumerating his menu of insects. His vices consist of chicken-stealing, dining on corn, and eating wild birds and their eggs. The department does not recommend war against the bird, nor does it think protection should be afforded him.

"The attitude of the individual farmer toward the crow," the bulletin sets forth, "ought to be one of toleration when no serious losses are suffered. It should not be one of uncompromising antagonism resulting in the unwarranted destruction of these birds, which at times are most valuable aids to man."

Your nearest neighbor, or your best friend, will probably tell you that the crow is a bad fellow; we have become accustomed to the label, though it is largely a libel. Jim's faults are all too evident. Alack and alas! his virtues are not readily seen. As it is more charitable to look for the redeeming features or qualities, it would be more noble in us if we should take him as we do our human brothers—the good along with the bad.

If all the people and all the animals and all the birds were angels, this would be a dreary, uninteresting planet. The crow, being something of a philosopher, has grasped this truth. You never see him masquerading as an angel. He has some of the devil in him and, moreover, he does not care who knows.

Wise old John Burroughs was right. Nature did have the ebony bird very much at heart or she would not have scattered him so widely over the earth. And John agreed with the writer of this verse that

"Not all the people know
The wisdom of the crow
As they see him come and go.
With verdict brief
They say, 'You thief!'
And wish him only woe.

"That he's selfish we admit;
But he has a lot of grit,
And on favor not a bit
Does he depend.
Without a friend
He must live by mother wit."